

# DISCIPLINE FOR DISCIPLESHIP

**T**he primary aim of our Seventh-day Adventist school system is to disciple our students for the Lord Jesus Christ. We must seek every opportunity to encourage our students to choose a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to live out the principles of the Bible in their daily lives. Effective discipline is essential to accomplishing this goal.

When I began teaching, I truly wanted to accomplish this goal. I found that I could get students to obey—that is, do what I told them to do. But I had trouble getting them to *choose* to do what was right.

Eventually, I realized that I must change my focus from training students to do, to training and equipping them to *choose*. Such a change is a journey, not an event. It is most effectively made with good instructions (the Bible and the book *Education*), a good mentor, the companionship of educators who share the vision, a stable staff, and the willingness to follow where the Holy Spirit leads. For the Grants Pass Seventh-day Adventist School in Oregon, the past 10 years have provided just such conditions.

Training the mind, enlivening the spirit, and disciplining the will are the essence of true discipling. A fundamental requirement in discipling—and therefore in effective discipline—is trust. We cannot disciple a person who does not trust us. I therefore sought to demonstrate in my own life that I could be

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trusted, in order to become an effective discipler (disciplinarian). I sought to illustrate biblical principles not only when I lived up to them, but also how I responded when I failed.

In order for a Christian school to be effective, the students must see the entire staff demonstrating the principles of discipling among themselves. Every teacher must see all of the students—even those in other classrooms—as his or her responsibility.

An effective discipline program must allow students the freedom to fail. However, there must be accountability. Both teachers and students must be willing to hold one another accountable in Christian love.

#### **Guiding Principles<sup>4</sup>**

Our staff has found that a clear set of guiding principles and a code of ethics

provide an effective frame of reference from which to work. Cooperating together, students, parents, and staff fulfill the mission by:

- Developing a personal relationship with our Saviour and sharing it with others.
- Discovering and applying the principles of Scripture.
- Developing and maintaining trust in all relationships.
- Using our abilities and opportunities to develop excellence in ourselves and others, especially as outlined in 2 Peter 1:5-8.
- Recognizing that the success of the group depends upon the contribution of each individual.
- Choosing responsible actions and attitudes that result in privilege and freedom.

For effective learning to take place, students must know clearly what is expected of them. The biblical principles relating to acceptable behavior must be taught by illustration and application.

One of the most important principles is found in Matthew 18:15-17: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you

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would a pagan or a tax collector” (NIV). This principle requires us to deal with problems at their source, seeking to win the offender to godly repentance. It applies to all relationships among students, teachers, parents, and others.

#### How It Works

An illustration of the principle in Matthew 18 occurred recently with a group of sixth-grade girls. One day, Missy\* came to me after having received a very mean-spirited note from Shirley. I asked whether she had confronted Shirley concerning the matter. She said she had tried to find out what she had done to make Shirley upset, but Shirley was un-

### CODE OF ETHICS

I am responsible for my own actions, as well as holding others accountable for theirs. This includes:

- Being trustworthy.
- Practicing the principles of Matthew 5:23, 24 and Matthew 18:15-17.
- Promoting harmony and peace.
- Being of service to others.
- Applying the principles of Philippians 4:8 and 9.<sup>2</sup>

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willing to try to resolve the problem. Following the counsel of Matthew 18, I met with the two girls. We had prayer together, asking God’s wisdom and the influence of His Spirit. Shirley continued to be intransigent, while Missy sought understanding and resolution. Shirley finally broke down and revealed that she had felt bitter toward Missy since the second grade because when her father died, she thought Missy had laughed as Shirley shared her grief with the class. Missy could not remember the incident and would not normally behave in that manner. Nevertheless, she asked for forgiveness, and Shirley did the same.

As a result, a sixth-grade group of girls who had been involved in a power struggle met in a room by themselves and worked on several situations that had

been obstacles to their cooperation in class.

The goal of such interactions is loving reconciliation and restoration of the trust that is foundational to meaningful and effective relationships.

#### Who Is Responsible?

Another foundational principle in discipling discipline is that whoever owns the problem must be the one to deal with it. This means clearly accepting responsibility for the offense, asking forgiveness, doing what is necessary to restore or repay, and making a commitment about future behavior (Proverbs 14:9, 28:13). The objective is to restore broken relationships by rebuilding trust.

**S**ome young men used to come in from the community during lunch break to socialize with our upper-grade pupils. Our students had obtained permission from their parents for the other youth to join the lunch recreational activities, and the young men coming to campus had agreed to support the goals and objectives of the school.

At the end of an informal basketball game, as the visitors were leaving, Dean, one of our students who often spoke before thinking, made an inappropriate

*A primary-grade teacher from Grants Pass Seventh-day Adventist School, Grants Pass, Oregon, works through a behavior problem with a student from her class.*

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comment to them. One of the visitors, Charles, who was significantly larger than Dean, grabbed him, held him up against the wall, and threatened him. This incident caused concern regarding the safety of our students.

I contacted Charles and told him that if he or his friends came on our campus again, I would ask the sheriff to escort them away. A few days later, Charles called and asked me for an appointment. At the meeting, he asked my forgiveness for what he admitted was inappropriate behavior as a guest on our campus. His demeanor was contrite, and I readily forgave him. As a result of talking to some of his friends on campus, he asked if he could meet with the students who had witnessed his offense to confess and ask forgiveness. Later, demonstrating courage and honesty, Charles clearly defined his offense and asked the students' forgiveness, assuring them that they had no need for concern about their safety as a result of his behavior. With permission from the concerned parents, the school again gave Charles and his friends the privilege of socializing with our students during lunch break. His behavior was exemplary. The students from our school also understood the need to accept responsibility for their behavior.

Ellen G. White states that: "The true object of reproof is gained only when the

wrongdoer himself is led to see his fault and his will is enlisted for its correction. When this is accomplished, point him to the source of pardon and power. Seek to preserve his self-respect and to inspire him with courage and hope."<sup>3</sup> In seeking to follow this counsel and allow the student to correct misjudgments or misbehaviors early, we use an observation-response form. It includes a place for the teacher's objective and for student response. The student may accept responsibility for the observed behavior, seek forgiveness and state his or her commitment for future behavior, or may explain that, considering the circumstances, he or she thinks the behavior was appropriate.

This process works effectively because it allows the teacher to address behavior problems with a minimum of disruption, and gives the student a chance to respond. It also prevents embarrassment. On more than one occasion, the behavior I observed was not what I thought it was, and the student's explanation showed it to be legitimate, sparing me the consequences of acting on poor judgment.

If the student's reaction to the Observation-Response Form is inappropriate or he or she is unwilling to accept responsibility, then a Personal Responsibility Plan must be filled out. Less flexible than the previous form, it requires the student to complete it, have a parent sign it, and re-

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turn it the next day. The student may not attend class until the plan is completed acceptably.

### **Reconciliation and Restoration**

In most schools, major problem behaviors are dealt with by a discipline committee. I have noticed that when the committee deals with serious behavior that is generally known by the staff and other students, it is difficult to achieve restoration. The continued brokenness of the students' relationships is evidenced by their avoiding eye contact as they pass teachers or other students in the hall. As a result, they are often reluctant to participate fully in the life of the school.

We have found two things to be beneficial in the restoration process. First, when a student behaves in a way that requires suspension, he or she may not re-enter our school without a face-to-face meeting with the faculty. At this time, students must demonstrate ownership of their behavior by explaining to the faculty

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***The Grants Pass School staff works through a discipline problem with a student who was suspended from school and requested a meeting with the faculty to seek readmittance.***

why they are there. The students can ask for—and receive—forgiveness from the whole group.

This action has a profound restorative effect. The students know that the whole faculty is aware of what happened. They receive forgiveness and acceptance from faculty members who offer love and support. The staff can testify about their own efforts to seek for and accept the work of God's Word and His Spirit in their lives. They thus point the students to the Spirit of Christ as the most effective source of behavior change and offer their support.

If an offender's behavior is widely known or has adversely affected other students, we provide an opportunity for him or her to confess and ask forgiveness of all who observed or were affected by the behavior. Although this takes courage, the process has been very effective in achieving restoration and building self-respect.

A few years ago, several of our older students attended a Halloween party at a non-member student's house. As the party progressed, some of the students discovered the stash of liquor belonging to the student's father. Only her mother was there to chaperone, and she was upstairs fixing snacks. Before the party was over, one of the students was sick and several were obviously under the influence of alcohol.

Some of the parents did not want the school involved, but our handbook clearly states that some conduct, whether on or off campus, is of concern to us and, therefore, subject to discipline. If students are suspended, they must request an appointment with the faculty in order to accept responsibility for their actions and to seek restoration to fellowship in the school. We believed the action of these students warranted suspension. Two of the parents irately complained that their children would be subjected to humiliation, which they assumed would be a part of the process. I gently explained that if their children did not meet with the faculty, they could not continue to attend our school.

### Positive Results

The other students involved in the episode made appointments to meet with the faculty, and the two upset parents

agreed to meet with the staff themselves prior to our meeting with their children. With the permission of those participating, we had them sit in on a disciplinary meeting between the faculty and a parent and student who supported our discipline process. After they observed the positive, restorative way in which the student was held accountable, both the parents insisted that their children meet with us the next day. In fact, all of the students involved in the incident met individually with the staff. They accepted responsibility for their actions and asked forgiveness. We forgave and affirmed them. Each one made a commitment in writing about future behavior and stood before his or her peers to confess and ask forgiveness. Their fellow students readily forgave them. Every one of the students involved in this incident was able to successfully complete the school year.

**B**y following biblical principles, we had restored each student to a position of trust as part of the school community. Trust was an essential ingredient in motivating them to choose principled obedience. In the previous situation, one of the parents had manifested a negative, distrustful stance toward the school for several years. After her child went through the discipline process, she had a significantly more positive and cordial attitude.

### What Have We Learned?

The key elements of discipling discipline are (1) adults who understand and practice the biblical principles being taught, (2) support for the foundational principle of trust, (3) freedom for students to fail, and (4) a high degree of accountability for everyone involved.

It is also necessary for everyone to accept personal responsibility for his or her behavior. The staff must be willing to spend the time, when necessary, to effectively apply the principles. They must have the wisdom, experience, and ability to effectively point the student to the true source of help. The process can be summarized as applying these four R's:

- A *redemptive* spirit on the part of the school staff;
- A *repentant* spirit on the part of the student;

- A willingness by all to be *reconciled*; and
- An atmosphere conducive to *restoration*.

There have been measurable results here at the Grants Pass Seventh-day Adventist School as we have applied our vision of discipling students through discipline. Our students are taking leadership roles in the youth program of our local churches, the conference boarding school, and the conference youth programs. Our school has a warm, nurturing atmosphere resulting from the high level of trust and effectiveness of the restoration process. Two follow-up Valuegenesis surveys in which we have participated indicate significant positive growth in several important areas of healthy spiritual concepts and practices. Parents are learning to apply the principles and are reporting improved family relationships and behaviors. Our staff enjoys a less stressful environment in which to minister to the needs of the students. We are grateful for the blessings that God has bestowed as we have applied the principles in this article, and recommend them to other schools. ☞

\* The names used in this article have been changed to protect student privacy.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The following concepts should not be construed as prescriptive—they simply represent the combined effort of the staff, students and the school board of our school over the past 10 years.
2. *Grants Pass Seventh-day Adventist School Handbook*, pp. 4, 5.
3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), pp. 291, 292.

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